

How to

WIN

at College

*Surprising Secrets for Success
from the Country's Top Students*

CAL NEWPORT

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*This rule may apply more to the gentlemen than to the ladies, since, for whatever reason, college-age men tend to have a noted deficiency when it comes to personalizing their living space. Or to put it another way: I have seen WWII-era foxholes with more personality than some guys' dorm rooms. And just to be clear on definitions, the following items don't count as legitimate decoration: any poster involving the movie *Animal House*, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, or Will Ferrell; any photographic portrait originally published in *Maxim*, *Stuff*, or *Sports Illustrated*; any item that may, with a certain probability, have spent a healthy chunk of its previous existence adorning the wall of a bar or liquor store.*

Your room decor should create a space that is both comfortable and a healthy reflection of your personality. This doesn't necessarily mean going crazy with fancy furniture,

walls of quirkily framed photographs, sheets that match a coordinated rug and curtains set, or, God forbid, Christmas lights. But it does mean moving beyond barren walls punctuated only with the occasional predictable poster.

Why decorate? Because it will have a positive effect on your mood and energy. To wake up, go to sleep, and take breaks throughout the day in a personalized and comfortable room is refreshing. Going to classes, studying for tests, and writing papers is stressful, and having a comforting environment to retreat to is a great way to release tension. Not to mention that people like to hang out in comfortable places. A well-designed student pad will attract more visitors, which will also help your mood and social life.

66 If your room is just a starkly lit white cell, you are never going to feel completely relaxed. And this means the tensions that build throughout the day will never completely be released. Over time, this will sap your energy and diminish your performance as a student. Your surroundings really do make a difference.

Find something that truly interests you and incorporate it into your space. Are you a guitar player? Mount your guitars on a wall. Are you a fan of Asian art? Buy three matted black frames, put a print in each, and hang them in an aesthetically pleasing row above your desk. Are you a movie buff? Find posters for two or three movies that you think are particularly influential. Frame them in cheap poster frames of the type you can easily buy at Wal-Mart. Hang them on a wall, and mount a little light above or below each.

While you are at it, find an alternative to the fluorescent

lights in your room. Two good floor lamps and a solid desk lamp can fill your room with a nice incandescent glow. Put a rug on the floor, as cheap carpet or tile is depressing when left uncovered. And buy a piece of furniture that makes you happy. Maybe find a beat-up sofa, or a used armchair, or anything comfortable that you can sink down into while you watch TV or read a book.

There is of course no need to attack your one-room double with a precriminal Martha Stewart-style zeal, but take the time to make your space relaxing. These little touches make a difference.

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Schedule Your Free Time

60 *Free time is both a blessing and a curse for a successful college student. On the one hand, most of your fondest memories will come from hanging around with your friends, talking, playing video games, and watching indecipherable Japanese kids' shows on the Cartoon Network (trust me). On the other hand, it is dangerously easy to lose too much productivity to the allure of recreation. You would be surprised by how simple it can become to convince yourself to take yet another big break, even when you know that you have a lot of work waiting to be completed. You could also find yourself suffering from an even worse problem, which is feeling guilty every time you try to relax, worrying that there is probably some work you could be doing right then. You don't want to deal with either of these afflictions.*

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Fortunately, there is an unconventional yet simple way to both avoid these problems and ensure that you get the perfect amount of rest and relaxation: **Schedule your free time.** Most people consider free time to be any time when they are not explicitly working. All you need to do is flip this understanding, and say that work time is any time that you are not explicitly relaxing. When you create your schedule each morning, you need to do two things. First, choose an end point for the day. For example, you might say that ten P.M. is the end of your workday, and from that point on you will just relax until you go to sleep. Second, decide exactly when you are going to relax throughout the day. For example, you might decide that you will spend a half hour after lunch watching TV, two hours in the afternoon to go to the gym and hang out with friends, and an hour or two surrounding dinner to unwind. The rest of your time you will be working. As you move through your day, there will never be any question as to whether you should be relaxing. Either you are in one of your scheduled break periods, or you are working. Not only does this cut down on impromptu breaks, but it can also increase your work ethic—everyone works harder right before a scheduled reprieve.

By reversing the way you think about free time, not only will you work more, but when you do relax, you will relax better. There is no fear that you are being irresponsible, or neglecting something important. Scheduling your free time may sound a little scary at first, but it shouldn't. You are not actually reducing—

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or increasing—the amount of free time you have during the day, you are just labeling and consolidating it so you can maximize the benefits of kicking back. Scheduling your free time is quite simply a win-win proposition, and a great way to painlessly improve your productivity.

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Eat Alone Twice a Day

At college, meals tend to be like an organizational black hole—they unexpectedly suck hours of free time out of your day. By the time you gather a group of friends, find a table at a dining hall, eat a meal, shoot the breeze, finally break away from the group, and rebuild your focus enough to get back to work, your simple meal has transformed into a major time commitment. Don't get the wrong idea, **taking the time to eat a social meal with your friends is a great idea; just don't do it more than once a day.**

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Eat breakfast in your dorm room, or grab a quick bite on the way to your first class. Mornings are painful, so you are not missing much in terms of company. If you have a busy night ahead of you, arrange to eat lunch with your friends. Then, later, you can get your dinner to go and eat it in your dorm room, barely interrupting your work cycle. If you're facing a busy afternoon and an easy

night, then arrange to meet your friends for dinner. Eat a quick lunch alone in the dining hall over a newspaper between tasks on your daily schedule.

Frequent, long meals are a schedule spoiler for successful students. This rule is simple, but it will keep you both efficient and social.

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Don't Study in Your Room

If there was an official ranking of the absolute worst places to study, your dorm room would probably fall somewhere between the New Jersey Turnpike and a Metallica concert. Studying in your dorm room has only one advantage going for it: convenience. Unfortunately, this doesn't count for much, as studying is not supposed to be convenient, it's supposed to be effective. And the most effective place to study is an environment that inspires you to think intelligently, an environment without any unnecessary distractions or temptations for distraction. Or, to put it more plainly, **STUDY AT**

THE LIBRARY!

In the Ten Commandments for getting good grades, *Thou shall not study in thy room* is commandment one through five; it's that important. Take a moment to reflect on your dorm room: it's crowded; people are coming and going; every possible distraction from TV to

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food to video games to AOL Instant Messenger are within easy reach; the building is noisy; you are surrounded by friends. If you want to be productive you have to escape from this environment.

Set aside a large block of time every day to spend studying at the library. Make it the place where you accomplish your most demanding schoolwork. Because it's inconvenient to walk to the library and settle into a study spot, you will be less likely to leave on a whim. Because the library environment is quiet without many distractions, you will have an easier time concentrating, and thus get more quality work done faster. And because the library surrounds you with row after row of solemn academic tomes and diligently studying students, it will be easier for you to get into that high-powered, intellectual zone.

Libraries were designed to maximize your academic productivity. Dorm rooms seem to be designed to minimize it. Successful students recognize that it's not enough to just get through your schoolwork, you also have to give yourself every opportunity to do the work effectively. And besides, the more efficiently you complete your assignments, the more guilt-free time you can spend adding to the entertaining chaos that is your dorm life. When it comes time to study, go where it counts.

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Don't Study in Groups

As long as we are trying to take all the fun out of studying, here is another stab to the heart: **Don't study in groups.** At first glance, multiperson study sessions seem to have a lot of advantages: they are social; they hold you accountable for learning material; they reduce the amount of material you have to study on your own; and they provide a safety net of people to help you understand difficult topics. Unfortunately, study groups also tend to have a rather major strike against them. They don't work!

The best way to learn difficult material is to go over it by yourself, with a lot of concentration, again and again and again until the concepts become second nature. There is no substitute for this type of learning. As boring or daunting as it may seem, you really do need to sit at your quiet desk in the library and absorb the material in all its detail. A member of a study group breezily ex-

plaining the topics to you is not the same thing. In fact, “learning” a concept from a group member is the study equivalent of trying to speed-read a book. You might get the gist of it, but you won’t remember or understand the specifics. Spending time with the material by yourself, until you fully understand it, will always be more effective than having someone else paraphrase it for you. And when it comes to efficiency, let’s not even get started on the obscene amount of study-group time that is inevitably sacrificed to the gods of gossip.

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This doesn’t mean that you must be completely isolated when you study. On the contrary, when you want to test your understanding of a concept, or are having trouble with a particular problem, interacting with other people is very helpful. The key, however, is to seek out someone for specific help on a specific issue, then return to your solo work. Instead of organizing a study group, arrange for some classmates to study at the library at the same time as you, so they will be available to provide focused help as issues arise.

This is how top students tame difficult material. Leave group studying to elementary school kids and law students—the truth is that undergraduates learn best through a little lonely concentration.

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Stay in Touch

*College is exciting. College is busy. But most of all, college is a demanding mistress that can suck you wholeheartedly into its isolated womb, cutting you off from all that once defined your life before you crossed its ivy-covered threshold. Which is all just an adjective-rich way of saying: **Stay in touch with your friends from back home.***

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It can be surprisingly easy to lose touch with the important people in your life. College is so socially, mentally, and physically consuming that if you don't make a specific effort to keep in touch, you will lose your connection to your back-home buds. Why is it important that you keep these old friendships alive? Because your old friends know you better than your college friends. When you go through rough times, a phone call to a friend from home will pick you back up. You will never feel lonely. Your sense of personal identity will remain strong. And most important, if you lose contact

with your friends, you will have nothing to do when you go home for the holidays.

To successfully stay in touch with someone means that you must talk with him or her at least once a month. And, this is important, AOL Instant Messenger does not count. Nor does forwarding your friend a link to an unforgivably stupid animation you found on the Internet. You need to actually call on a phone and have voice-to-voice contact.

Talking to four or five of your closest friends, just once a month, is no big deal in terms of time commitment. But the benefit in terms of strengthening your relationships is great. You never realize how important your back-home friendships are until you begin to lose them. Stay in touch.

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Sign Up for Something Your First Week

The first week of college is an awkward time to say the least. You don't really know anyone, the proper procedures for using the dining hall remain elusive, and you fear that if one more person tries to make you play a fun get-acquainted icebreaker game you might snap and stab them to death with their own name tag-marker. One reaction to this situation is to become a Freshman Fall Hermit and retreat into the comfort of dorm-room television and studying for classes. This approach is not necessarily as bleak as it may at first sound. Through random encounters you will still begin to meet people despite your best efforts. But the hermit approach denies you a lot of opportunities to get excited early on in your collegiate career. And, of course, excitement and inspiration about your pursuits are the fuel of a successful college student.

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So instead of hunkering down and letting your Freshman Fall

pass by harmlessly, embrace it wholeheartedly by signing up for something your first week. It could be an intramural sports team, a publication, an affinity group, the campus radio station, a musical ensemble, or a club that gathers regularly to discuss world issues. There are a staggering number of activities you can potentially join; choose just one that excites you. Your first week is the best time to get involved. You will be one of many new members learning the ropes, you will instantly meet new people, and throughout your first term you will already have a sense of extracurricular purpose. The awkwardness of Freshman Fall disappears when you have a prefab group of acquaintances to say "hi" to as you pass them in the library. And having projects to work on outside of class is a great way to start revving up the ambition and inspiration that will help you win at college.

The happiest students are also the most involved students. When it comes to crafting your slate of collegiate pursuits, the sooner you get involved, the better.